



King's Research Portal

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ricks, D. B. (2014). Lucretian moments in modern Greek poetry. In D. Tziovas (Ed.), *Re-imagining the past: Antiquity and modern Greek culture* (pp. 252-265). Oxford University Press; Oxford.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This might suggest a certain randomness; yet, given Karyotakis' slippery ironies, and poets' caginess about acknowledging their models, we need not necessarily take him at his word—perhaps he was simply checking the reference for something that had been in his mind throughout the composition of the volume. In any event, the epigraph, cited in its original Latin to give a more lapidary edge to a book preoccupied with the tension with the lapidary, over against the dilapidations to which the human frame is prone, could not be more apposite as the heading for what could be called the longest suicide note in poetry:

Et metus ille foras praeceps Acheruntis agendus
funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo.
LUCRETIVS

(and that fear of Acheron which troubles the life of man from its deepest depths must be sent packing)

How far do these lines have a shaping role for the book beyond ornament, albeit striking ornament? We must begin by acknowledging that Lucretius is anything but pro-suicide (*DRN* 3.79ff.), while Karyotakis has been described in a classic essay as 'a follower of Hegesias' (Malanos 1983). But a glance at a slightly earlier employment of the same epigraph may help here. Mrs Humphry Ward's novel *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898) has a truncated form of the phrase as its epigraph: 'metus ille [...] Acheruntis [...] Funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo'. In this book dramatizing the culture clash between religion (in the form of recusant Catholicism) and atheism, the female protagonist Laura Fountain lives under the shadow of a dead free-thinking father who has denied God: initially a victim of his paternalistic absolutism, she then falls under the spell of the dogmatic protagonist of the book's title. Mrs Ward (Matthew Arnold's niece) was a highly educated and shrewd author who clearly saw the lines, here cropped to take a neutral position, as a kind of key to the novel—or a kind of lens to read it through.⁵

Of Karyotakis' case, despite the clear differences of genre and outlook, the same may be said: the epigraph elicits and enriches a

⁵ Oddly, the fullest study of her work, Sutherland (1990), makes no attempt to do so.

number of features which run through the volume as a whole—a volume of unsurpassed importance in and for twentieth-century Greek poetry. These include: nature as fundamentally indifferent towards man (the book's opening verse is 'Our death is a requirement of the unbounded nature all around us'); man as always on the brink of dissolution into meaningless atoms; tranquillity of mind as the only aspiration. But that is to put it too loosely. For one of the most strange and powerful features of *Elegies and Satires* is that blend of metaphysical conviction in a poetic vocation, on the one hand (so, magnificently, *DRN* 3.1ff), and mordant satire, on the other, for which Lucretius provides a distinctive model. For Karyotakis, admirer as he was of Palamas' *Satirical Exercises* (1909–12), the older poet's 'The Triumph' must have had too strong an air of the pulpit (though interestingly, Palamas (n.d.: 2.86) thought Lucretius a greater satirist than Juvenal); while it is the uneasy lightness of touch with which life and death are handled in *Elegies and Satires* that is its essence.

Once again, we can invoke a western European parallel to illuminate a Greek case which deserves to be better known among students of Lucretian reception, and Mallock comes to hand. In his slim volume of verses, *Lucretius on Life and Death* (1900b), Mallock took a breather from an elaborate work endorsing the claims of the Roman Church to write up some celebrated passages of the *DRN* in the metre of Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*, thus aiming at certain key features of what would later be Karyotakis' appropriative mode in relation to Lucretius. These may summarily be described as follows.

The first is the lyricizing through excerptation of the long expository poem which the modern reader (it is felt) can no longer swallow whole: just as the 'Heroic Trilogy' in *Elegies and Satires* is a miniaturizing of Palamas' poems of that name (1907). The second is the blend of lyric and satire: for this, the sexual act (though this is not Mallock's emphasis here) forms ideal fodder for such treatment. Lucretius is unsparing in this (famously, *DRN* 4.1121ff), and is a likely source of what in Karyotakis might otherwise be seen (notably in the poem 'Revulsion') as mere misogyny: *DRN* 4.1160–1208 have a very similar flavour. Third and most important is the acknowledgement that any modern incarnation of the Roman poet (any Lucretius after 1417, that is; but still more one who makes an appearance in the twentieth century) must be reanimated in a language whose animus is no longer against the pagan gods the historical Lucretius disavowed but which